

15th October 2023 – Morning Service

Megan Ashmore

Call to Worship - Philippians 4: 4

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Welcome to this time of worship with God. He is here and all is ready for us to begin our praise

StF 35 – The trumpets sound

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| 1) The trumpets sound, the angels sing,
The feast is ready to begin;
The gates of heaven are open wide,
And Jesus welcomes you inside. | <i>Ch)</i> Sing with thankfulness songs of pure delight,
Come and revel in heaven's love and light;
Take your place at the table of the King,
The feast is ready to begin,
The feast is ready to begin. |
| 2) Tables are laden with good things,
O taste the peace and joy He brings;
He'll fill you up with love divine,
He'll turn your water into wine. | 3) The hungry heart He satisfies,
Offers the poor His paradise;
Now hear all heaven and earth applaud
The amazing goodness of the Lord. |

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Prayers of Adoration and Thanks¹

Loving God, bestower of all good gifts, we praise you in acknowledgement of all we have. On this autumnal morning we thank you for warm clothes; food to sustain us; the gift of our senses that enables us to see, hear, feel, smell and taste the elements of this season. We rejoice in all that you offer to us – your love so freely available; the joy of knowing you that gives assurance in the difficult times of life; and the peace that passes all understanding, but reminds us of your love within our hearts. We thank you for the greatest gift of all – your son Jesus Christ, our Saviour and friend. Our feeble attempts to acknowledge your overwhelming generosity will never be enough and so we just bow our heads in awe and humility that you could love us so much.

O Lord of majestic mountain and roaring sea. O Lord of astonishing beauty and outlandish loveliness. O Lord of the miniscule, the overlooked and the never seen. O Lord of the extraordinary and the everyday. Open our eyes to see your presence, our ears to hear the whisper of your voice, and, realising you in every place and every moment of our existence, may we live with justice, peace, care and hope. **Amen.**

Reading: Psalm 106 (selected verses)

Praise the LORD.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise?

Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right.

Remember me, LORD, when you show favour to your people, come to my aid when you save them, that I may enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones, that I may share in the joy of your nation and join your inheritance in giving praise.

We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly. When our ancestors were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name's sake, to make his mighty power known. He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up; he led them through the depths as through a desert. He saved them from the hand of the foe; from the hand of the enemy he redeemed them. The waters covered their adversaries; not one of them survived. Then they believed his promises and sang his praise.

But they soon forgot what he had done and did not wait for his plan to unfold. At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So he said he would destroy them — had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.
Let all the people say “Amen.” Praise the Lord.

StF 77 – Give thanks to the Lord

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| 1) Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King:
His love endures forever.
For He is good, He is above all things.
His love endures forever.
Sing praise, sing praise. | <i>Ch) Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever
Forever, God is faithful
Forever, God is strong
Forever, God is with us
Forever, Forever</i> |
| 2) With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,
His love endures forever
For the life that's been reborn
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise,
Sing praise, sing praise | 3) From the rising to the setting sun,
His love endures forever.
By the grace of God, we will carry on.
His love endures forever.
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise |

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Reading: Exodus 32: 1 – 14

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

“I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. “Lord,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people.

Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Reflection

I'm sure you've all come across the slogan, "mind the gap." Written on platforms and spoken clearly over the tannoy at train stations, it warns people of the gap between the platform and the train, which occurs when the straight carriages of the train don't align with the curvature of the platform, or vice versa. Time and again we read in the bible about how God's own people, the tribe of Israel, were misaligned with God, and the passage we have just heard is no exception.

Having been led safely out of Egypt by God, the Israelites are now camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Moses has been summoned to climb the mountain to talk with God. He is gone a long time and while he is away the people panic, lose their faith in Moses and ultimately God, and taking matters into their own hands persuade Aaron to make a calf from the available gold they have. This calf then becomes their object of worship. All-seeing, all-knowing God realises what is going on and is rightly angry telling Moses that He has had enough; that He is going to destroy them. But Moses pleads with God. He intercedes on behalf of the people. *"Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people"* he begged.

Moses does a noteworthy thing here: God actually says that He will destroy the people and make Moses and his descendants into a great nation. Moses could have accepted that, and I bet he was sorely tempted! The moany, miserable Israelites would get their comeuppance, and Moses and his descendants could rule the future nation. But Moses sacrificed his own feelings for the good of the people who were driving him mad. There was a gap forming between God and His people, but Moses stepped into it. He spoke to God on behalf of the people, asking God to remember the promises He made to their descendants. *"So the Lord changed his mind and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."*

"Mind the gap." It is a warning. But perhaps too it is a command. An instruction from God that we are to mind the gap between Him and his people – mind as in look after. There are many people who are not aligned with God for one reason or another. God calls us to stand in that gap and pray for them; to act on behalf of those who cannot or will not do it for themselves.

That is a challenge. Perhaps we think we can't do that because we don't know what to say. Remember this is the Moses who initially tried to get out of doing God's work by claiming to be no speaker. Now he feels his relationship with God will allow him to speak up, to plead the cause of the people, and even remind God of His promised plans for the future. Moses is very upfront and open with God. So let's be brave. Say it as it is. God won't mind. He'll be glad we've expressed concern and will guide us on. Maybe we feel the people don't deserve God's forgiveness and attention. A few week's ago the lectionary reading was about Joseph being reconciled with his brothers when they travelled to Egypt for food during the famine. Joseph had a number of options available to him when he saw them. He could dismiss his brothers out of hand – let them starve. He could send for the guards to lock them up, or worse have them killed. He could reveal who he was and mock them for disbelieving his visions. He had the power and means to respond however he wished. And his wish was to forgive them. To put everything behind them all and start again. His love for his brothers, his father, and above all, his love for God, urged him to be reconciled with them. Let's look at other people as our brothers and sisters in Christ and seek to reconcile them with God.

Or do we think it's someone else's job to mind or manage that gap? Chris Watson recently reminded us of Jonah's story. Jonah who thought he could escape doing work for God as it was out of his comfort zone and not what he wanted to do at all. But of course, he couldn't get away with it. So let's not be like him – taking the long and complicated route to doing God's will. Let's listen for God's voice and when we hear it ask Him to help us. When God calls us to mind the gap, how will we respond?

We ponder on these thoughts as we sing our next hymn. “I the Lord of sea and sky” was composed in 1979 by Dan Shutte and the words are based on Isaiah 6 and 1 Samuel 3 – both of which are accounts of being called by God to prophesy to His people. But I think the words are relevant to us today in the context of our calling to pray for others. “Here I am Lord – I will hold your people in my heart.”

StF 663 – I the Lord of sea and sky

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| 1) I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry;
All who dwell in dark and sin
My hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send? | 2) I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
Give them hearts for love alone;
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send? |
| Ch) <i>Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
If You lead me;
I will hold Your people in my heart.</i> | 3) I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
Till their hearts are satisfied;
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send? |

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Our gospel reading this morning comes from Matthew and is the Parable of the Wedding Banquet

Reading: Matthew 22: 1 - 14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. “Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ “But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

“Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ “For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Reflection

At bible study the other week Alan put us into groups and asked us to choose a parable from a given list, read it and discuss its meaning. When he came to the second group, he asked “Which parable did you choose?” The answer came swiftly, “The wrong one!!” That group had chosen a particularly difficult one; and today’s parable could be placed in that category too!

Imagine you are sitting alongside the chief priests and the Pharisees hearing this story: The king is holding a wedding feast for his son, and heads of state, local dignitaries and other noble people have been invited. Can you see the nods of approval as the elders agree this is the right way to do things? What an occasion this will be. But Jesus continues and tells them that the king's invitation is rejected by all those who have been invited. Not just one or two who find they're double booked in their diaries. But all of them. To make matters worse, some even kill the messengers. This is shocking! Hear the tut tutting of the Pharisees. This is tantamount to war, and so the king issues orders for those who refused him to be destroyed.

But what about the feast? Surely the king won't let all the food and preparation go to waste. The parable continues - the king opens up the invitation to everyone the servants can find. Mmm. There is a mixed response among the listeners now: some agreeing that that is a noble thing to do, while others are not quite certain about inviting just anyone to join in. We look at the audience and wonder when the penny will drop. When will the moral of the parable begin to filter through?

Jesus is talking about the kingdom of God, about his own presence amongst them. It, he, is available to all, and yet Israel, God's chosen people, reject him. They do not see Jesus as the promised Messiah who offers everyone a seat at God's banquet. They cannot see what the blind can see; they do not hear what the deaf can hear; they don't rejoice as the sinner rejoices; they don't give as the poor give; they don't love as those who are outcast love. Through their stubbornness and pride in refusing to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah, and goodness knows, God sent enough notification of the coming of his son, they are missing out on a heavenly feast.

I wonder, do we accept that there is a place for all in the kingdom of God? Do we let it be known that there is a place for all in the kingdom of God?

While the first part of this parable throws up questions to consider, the real challenge comes in the second part when we hear how the poor guy who doesn't appear in clothes fit for a wedding is thrown out. To make sense of this seemingly harsh consequence we need to examine the background culture to this parable. It was the custom that those invited to the palace would be provided with a new outfit from the vast wardrobe collection of the king kept especially for this purpose. They were given grand robes, at no cost to themselves, to replace their everyday clothes, many of which may well have been ragged. In accepting this gift, the guests were willing to be transformed, to do away with their rags and be clothed in a manner fitting for the occasion. The guest who refused the gift was not willing to accept the offer of something new.

Maybe we can understand the reluctance of this poor man if we consider this parable in its physical/earthly form – perhaps the clothes he was wearing was all he possessed and removing them would take him out of his comfort zone; perhaps he wasn't one for conformity; maybe he didn't feel worthy of being treated in a royal manner. All valid considerations. But when we consider this parable in light of the kingdom of God, which was the purpose of Jesus when he told it, we see that to refuse the robe that Jesus offers us is to refuse the gift of grace which will transform us. Jesus, our mediator, our intercessor, has carried the pain of our sins. We are forgiven through his dying on the cross and as resurrection people we are dressed in undeserved garments of righteousness. To refuse them means to deny Jesus and all that he has done for us, and continues to do for us, every moment of every day.

Hear some words of Paul:

"Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Romans 8:34)

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Colossians 3: 12)

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (Ephesians 4: 22 – 24)

While God is perfectly willing to clothe us in the garments of Christ, it's up to us to put them on and wear them faithfully to the glory of God. Let's accept the robe of righteousness as we pray:

Loving, forgiving Father. Help us to lay down the rags of our lives and accept the robe of righteousness which you freely offer to us through your grace and mercy. We are sorry for being reluctant to part with those things which prevent us from enjoying the fullest relationship possible with you. Reclothe us in garments of praise and adoration; outfits of love and goodness, that we might serve you, majesty. We continue our prayers of confession as we reflect on the words of our next hymn:

StF 331 – King of kings

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| 1) King of Kings, majesty.
God of heaven living in me,
Gentle Saviour, closest friend,
Strong deliverer, beginning and end,
All within me falls at Your throne. | 2) Earth and heaven worship You,
Love eternal, faithful and true,
Who bought the nations, ransomed souls,
Brought this sinner near to Your throne;
All within me cries out in praise. |
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*Ch) Your majesty, I can but bow.
I lay my all before You now.
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve Your majesty.*

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Prayers of Intercession

We come now to a time of prayer when we bring those concerns of our hearts to the one who can heal the broken hearted. We begin with words of another of Paul's letters, this time writing to the Philippians:

Philippians 4: 1 – 9 - *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.*

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

And so we pray:

We pray for the world-wide church sharing the good news of the gospel through word and deed; for agencies and charities who work in your name to promote good health and well-being, provide shelter for the homeless, give food to the hungry and medical care to the injured and ill. We pray for places of the world where there is war, famine, disease, drought; for those places where Christians are persecuted for their faith and for all those whose voice is never heard.

May your healing Spirit move throughout the world.

We pray for our nation. Give all those in positions of authority the discernment to seek your will as they make decisions for the future. We pray for local communities with diverse cultural groups, that they may be encouraged and supported to develop ways of living and working together.
May your peaceful Spirit move throughout this nation.

We pray for the churches in this district and circuit, and we ask for a blessing on our ministers, local preachers, worship leaders, group leaders and pastoral workers as they seek to serve you. Fill them with your joy and enthuse them in their work for the kingdom. And we recognise and give thanks for the work of all here who serve you in their daily lives.
May your guiding Spirit move throughout this circuit.

We pray for your people here in this church. We thank you that we are able to be here this morning to worship together and ask that as we go from here you will lead us in our service to you. We remember those who cannot be with us at present. We pray especially for those known to us [*Silence*]
May your comforting Spirit move throughout this church.

And in a moment of silence we pray for ourselves - not for riches, or an easy carefree life, but for the strength to trust in you; the humility to serve you and the grace to follow your way.
May your empowering Spirit move within us. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 255 – The kingdom of God is justice and joy

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| 1) The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow. | 3) The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss. |
| 2) The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair. | 4) God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all! |

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Blessing

For the blessings of this and all our days, we thank you, gracious God. Accept, we pray, not just this money but also our lives freely offered in gratitude for all you have done for us. Use them both, in this place and wherever you might take us. **Amen.** And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now, evermore. **Amen**

¹ *Helen Kirk, Chester and Stoke-on-Trent District Chair*